

MARIE SPARTALI STILLMAN: POETRY IN BEAUTY

Curriculum Connections

The Pre-Raphaelite painters had a strong connection to literature, usually drawing inspiration from the Bible or the work of great playwrights and poets such as Shakespeare, Dante, and Boccaccio. Marie Spartali Stillman was no exception and in fact dealt more closely with early Italian literature than many of her contemporaries. Below are pieces excerpted from this exhibit that exemplify her use of literature to inspire her work, and brief discussion regarding her visual representation as it relates to literary elements. While much of the literature Stillman represents can be difficult for students to access or comprehend in its entirety, her paintings can be used to show snapshots and discuss literary elements while also offering access points to important traditions in the canon.

This packet will address, in varying degrees, the standards listed below. The texts and concepts are most appropriate for High School students.

DE Visual Art Standards

- 2.1: Identify the elements of art.
- 2.4: Analyze the elements of art.
- 3.5: Describe and differentiate the origins of specific subject matter, symbols, and ideas in works of art.
- 3.6: Analyze how the use of subject matter, symbols, and ideas are used in works of art.
- 4.3: Describe how the arts and artists influence each other across history and cultures.
- 4.4: Speculate on how history and culture give meaning to a work of art.
- 5.5: Evaluate the artist's intent and effectiveness in communicating ideas and emotions in works of art.
- 6.1 Compare and contrast relationships and characteristics between the visual arts and other disciplines.
- 6.3: Describe how skills transfer between the visual arts and other disciplines.

National Core Art Standards

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| Creating | #1—Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work. |
| Producing | #6 Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work. |
| Responding | #7—Perceive and analyze artistic work.
#8—Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
#9—Evaluate and apply criteria to evaluate artistic work |

Common Core Literature Standard (Grades 9-12)

- RL 7 (9-10): Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment.
- RL 7 (11-12): Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem, evaluating how each version interprets the source text.
- SL 1 (9-12): Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions.

The Art: Dante and Virgil in the Dark Wood

The Inspiration: *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri



Dante and Virgil, in the Dark Wood, c. 1908

Marie Spartali Stillman (1844–1927)

Watercolor and gouache on paper, 12 × 19 in. (30.5 × 48.3 cm)

frame: 17 1/2 × 24 3/4 in. (44.5 × 62.9 cm)

Private Collection/ Photo credit: Carson Zullinger

This piece references one of the first scenes in *The Divine Comedy* by Dante. Dante, travelling through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven meets his guide, Virgil the ancient poet, who will lead Dante through his journey—beginning with the Dark Wood. This painting can lend itself to a discussion of allegory and the place of symbolism in literature and art. The full text of this scene can be found in the appendix.

Key Elements & Questions

TOPE: This painting lends itself to a comparison of tone in both the reading and the visual representation of it.

- What tone does Dante set up in the written scene?
- Can any of the words we use to describe the tone of the writing also describe the image?
- What colors did Stillman choose? Why do you think?
- How can we understand the way colors make us “feel”?

SYMBOLISM: There are three animals in the lower left corner of the work (leopard, lion, and wolf) which have uncertain symbolic meaning apart from the broad “sin” label.

- What can the images of these animals add to our understanding?
- What are some attributes you notice in these animals?
- Do those attributes relate to sin?
- What element of art helps to convey this meaning?

FORESHADOWING: Writers often use the early parts of their text to hint at upcoming events. Examine the different ways each piece treats foreshadowing.

- What does the composition of the painting add to this discussion?
- Are they heading up or downhill?
- Do the trees create open space or close in on them?
- How close are the animals?
- Does the text do as much to develop a foreboding future for our characters?

PROJECT IDEAS:

1. Using computer software (e.g. Adobe) manipulate the tone of the painting and color scheme. Does altering the tone alter the meaning of the piece? If so, how? Why?
2. Ask students to take a scene from a class text (even from another subject) and create a painting or art piece that re-interprets the same scene in a new medium. Compare and contrast the finished products to see how each student’s interpretation differs from one another—discuss.

The Art: The Enchanted Garden of Messer Ansaldo

The Inspiration: *The Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio



The Enchanted Garden of Messer Ansaldo, 1889

Marie Spartali Stillman (1844–1927)

Watercolor and gouache on paper mounted on panel 72.4 × 102.9 cm (28 ½ × 40 ½ inches)

Pre-Raphaelite, Inc., by courtesy of Julian Hartnoll

The inspiration for this piece, *The Decameron*, is a collection of stories told within the literary device of a Frame Narrative. The frame Boccaccio creates tells of seven people who, hoping to escape the spread of the Black Plague in Italy, retreat to a country house for two weeks and each night of their retreat (barring the Sabbath and one day a week devoted to work) they tell a story for a total of ten tales. Stillman's piece depicts a scene in one of these tales about a married woman who tells Messer Ansaldo (pictured in the white fur coat) that she will only succumb to his amorous advances should flowers bloom mid-winter. Messer Ansaldo achieves this with magic and the scene Stillman chose shows the moment he reveals his success to the shocked and troubled lady. *The Decameron* served as

inspiration in form for other frame narratives such as *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer. This painting lends itself to discussion of framing, and the role of the audience in literature and art.

Key Elements & Questions

FRAMING: The literary device of a story within a story (frame narrative) is used abundantly in literature. Examine Stillman's composition and discuss how 'framing' might be used differently in visual works.

- How does Stillman provide context to help the viewer understand the story she wants to tell?
- What would change if you zoomed out from this painting? Zoomed in?
- Who is at the center of the picture? Why?

NARRATIVE: Stillman chose this particular moment in the story for a reason. Think about the narrative Stillman tells through this choice and examine how the narrative might change if a different moment was chosen.

- Why do you think Stillman chose this scene over any others in the story?
- What does this particular depiction show that perhaps a moment earlier or later in the story wouldn't?
- Do the facial expressions of the characters help interpret the plot of the story?
- If you didn't know the background story, what would you be able to know about this painting?

AUDIENCE: Think about the ways a painter and a writer have to consider who will be reading/viewing their work.

- Does Stillman do anything to help your eyes move around the painting?
- Who do you think would enjoy looking at a painting like this?
- If the audience was children, would the painting change?

PROJECT IDEAS:

1. Have students visually show the "frame" that Boccaccio created in the original tale by providing them with reproductions of Stillman's painting in the center of a larger sheet of paper. Prompt students to visually represent the story that the painting's story is within on the outskirts of the painting—framing it.
2. Read this section of the Boccaccio tale. Does Stillman's painting add anything to the students' understanding?

The Art: Sir Tristram and La Belle Isolde

The Inspiration: *Morte d'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory



Sir Tristram and La Belle Isolde, 1873
Marie Spartali Stillman (1844–1927)
Watercolor and gouache on paper 53.1 × 75.9 cm (20 7/8 × 29 7/8 inches)
Private Collection / Photo credit: Prudence Cumming

This story, taken from the tales of King Arthur as told by Malory, is of a forbidden love between Sir Tristram and the queen, La Belle Isolde. Wounded, after fighting with a giant, Tristram is resting in the garden of the king unrecognized. The queen and her maiden discover his identity with the help of her lapdog, who was given to her by Tristram. The pup knows it is him and rushes to comfort Tristram—here we see the moment Isolde discovers her love is with her in the garden. This piece pairs well with a discussion of emotion, dramatic space, and description.

Key Elements & Questions

EMOTION: Stillman chose a moment filled with emotion. Examine the way in which the painter conveys this to the audience and consider how a writer might do the same.

- Look at Tristram's face, can you detect different emotions?
- What does the body language of the characters help us understand?
- Do the colors of the painting add to the emotion in anyway? How?

SPACE: Think about the way Stillman chose to place the characters on the canvas.

- If you were drawing a picture about lovers reuniting, how far apart would they be?
- Why do you think Stillman put Isolde facing away from Tristram?
- What elements of the spacing could be described as “dramatic”?
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DESCRIPTION: Think about how painters use images the same way writers use words.

- If you were to write a description of this scene, would it be more or less emotional for the viewer/listener?
- What elements did Stillman include in the composition that perhaps did not have to be there? What do they add to the visual description of the piece?

PROJECT IDEAS:

1. Play around with the dramatic space in this painting. Using computer software (like Adobe Creative Suite) or by manually cutting out the characters and placing them on a new background move them around and discuss at what distance the space becomes intimate, ridiculous, confusing, etc. Why/how does this change?
2. Look at other interpretations of Tristram and Isolde like the 2006 movie “Tristan + Isolde” or Ford Madox Brown's *The Death of Tristram*.